



Office of the
Commissioner of
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

What language does sport speak? The Commissioner of Official Languages presents a study on official languages in the Canadian sport system

The Commissioner of Official Languages, Dr. Dyane Adam, today published a special study on official languages in the Canadian sport system. This broad-based analysis of the high performance sport system looks at the possibilities for Canadian athletes to reach the top levels of their sport in their preferred official language. The study contains 16 recommendations with deadlines for their implementation. These are intended to form a strategic plan for change, one which the Commissioner is confident will be followed by Sport Canada and its partners.

The study indicates that the sport system has made progress on a number of linguistic issues over the past decade. Sport Canada sets out clear expectations of the organizations which it funds, and some sport organizations are models of bilingualism. The findings indicate that the sport system still has some way to go before it fully reflects Canada's linguistic duality.

The most obvious symptom of the inequality of the two official languages within the sport system is the fact that, although one Canadian in four speaks French (25%), fewer than one high performance athlete in five (18%) is French-speaking, and their presence is concentrated in a few sports. "Language alone cannot explain this situation, but by removing the linguistic barriers to sport participation we would be taking a significant step toward ensuring that French-speaking and English-speaking athletes are on an equal footing when it comes to participating on Canada's high performance sport teams," stated Dr. Adam.

Previous studies have focussed on the selection process for national teams as an impediment to Francophone athletes. This study found that selection processes are now more transparent and fair. However, French-speaking athletes face obstacles earlier in their development, and this study pinpoints three problem areas. The first arises in the difficult transition from provincial elite athlete to national team member, which is often complicated by conflicts between provincial and national sport organizations. Second, many national sport organizations cannot provide adequate services in French. Finally, and most importantly, in many cases, coaches of national teams cannot speak French. Francophone athletes identified the latter two issues as frequent sources of difficulties.

Athletes told the Commissioner that, for them, sport takes precedence over language issues. Nevertheless, athletes are forced to adapt to linguistic shortcomings in the sport system. "In a system that prides itself on being athlete-centred, Francophone athletes should not have to face the double challenge of mastering the English language as well as their sport in order to succeed at the highest levels," the Commissioner insisted. Some French-speaking athletes spoke of feelings of bewilderment and frustration when faced with having to learn to function in an English-only sport environment for the first time. The study results suggest the importance of implementing support and transition measures when athletes relocate to train in an environment where their language is not generally spoken.

On a positive note, athletes show an impressive depth of respect and understanding toward the other official language group. This was the most encouraging finding of this study and it underlines the contribution which sport can make to national unity.

This study indicates that the sport system as a whole does not have adequate administrative or financial support to manage its programs in both official languages and that some sport organizations appear to be caught in a self-reinforcing cycle of low Francophone membership and poor services in French. Dr. Adam recommends that the only way for them to break the cycle is to improve services in both official languages and build up membership to sustain these services. The Commissioner considers that every sport organization which calls itself national should be able to provide an adequate level of services in both official languages.

Within the vast network of the sport system, Sport Canada alone is subject to the Official Languages Act and therefore under the authority of the Commissioner. This is why the recommendations in this study are addressed to them. Dr. Adam recognizes that Sport Canada is taking important steps to ensure that the sport system is more responsive to the needs of athletes of both official languages, but all organizations involved will need to do their share in order to fully meet this objective.

"Canadian athletes should not have to adapt to the linguistic shortcomings of the sport system. In order to ensure that all athletes can compete on an equal basis, Sport Canada and its partners must work to develop a sport system which fully reflects Canada's linguistic duality," Dr. Adam concluded.

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Survey Results (PDF document).

Backgrounder

Official Languages in the Canadian Sport System

The study

This study was carried out between September 1999 and April 2000 by employees of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages to see whether the Canadian sport system meets athletes' linguistic needs. The study is based on:

1. over 100 interviews with Sport Canada, national sport organizations, multi-sport organizations, national sport centres (Calgary, Winnipeg and Montreal), members of the academic community, coaches and athletes.
2. a survey of Francophone and Anglophone athletes who receive support from the federal government, conducted to probe their attitudes, values and experiences, in terms of both sport in general and official languages in sport. We received responses from 107 English-speaking athletes and 118 French-speaking athletes.

Major findings

- While one in four Canadians is French-speaking (25%), only 18% of athletes who receive direct financial support from the federal government name French as their first official language, and

82% name English.

- The selection processes for national teams are based on objective criteria which are known in advance; they have mechanisms for arbitration of any disputes that may arise.
- The sport system as a whole has made progress in official languages in the past 10 years. Sport Canada sets clear expectations and requires sport organizations to meet certain official language requirements as a condition of funding. However, these official language requirements are minimal and there are no serious consequences for organizations that do not meet them. Athletes must adapt to the linguistic shortcomings of the system.
- The two groups of athletes differ in terms of their language experience in sport. Generally, Anglophone athletes are satisfied with the linguistic aspect of their sport experience, whereas Francophones point out shortcomings, particularly in coaching and in the services they receive from national sport organizations.
- Most national sport organizations lack clear policies on official languages and do not have adequate financial and administrative support to deliver programs in both official languages, including timely translation services. Our study shows that some sport organizations provide excellent services in both official languages, whereas others have difficulty with French.
- Conflicts between provincial and national sport organizations may also create barriers for athletes as they make the transition from provincial elite athlete to national team member.
- French-speaking athletes identified coaching as a frequent source of linguistic difficulties. The study results suggest that the coaching group for any national team should have some members, preferably including the head coach, who can speak both official languages, and that coaches should be provided with the resources and support needed to coach linguistically and culturally diverse groups.
- Athletes spoke of the importance of receiving such services as medical care and psychological counselling in their own language. At the time of our visits, the National Sport Centres in Calgary and Winnipeg were providing services to national teams in English only. The National Sport Centre in Montreal is able to provide all services in both official languages and has service providers in all areas, including counselling and medicine, who can speak both official languages.
- The study results also suggest the importance of support and transition measures when athletes relocate to train in an environment where their language is not generally spoken.

Sport Canada and the sport system

- The recommendations in this study are addressed to Sport Canada because, within the sport system, it alone is subject to the *Official Languages Act* and therefore under the authority of the Commissioner.
- The sport system is complex, with many players, both governmental and non-governmental, linked by bilateral and multilateral agreements. National sport associations are non governmental organizations and are not themselves subject to the *Official Languages Act*. However, Sport Canada provides funding to many of these associations under contribution agreements (the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework). These agreements contain minimum expectations that spell out in detail which services must be offered in both official languages and when.
- Sport Canada sets out clear expectations of the organizations it funds and has made significant progress over the past decade in helping sport organizations improve their official languages performance. However, Sport Canada's monitoring of contribution agreements to ensure effective implementation of minimum official languages expectations by national sport organizations is somewhat weak.
- The federal government has given sport organizations a mixed message by simultaneously cutting their funding in the mid-1990s and requiring them to meet certain standards regarding

official languages. The government is now increasing funding to sport organizations and has recently announced initiatives to improve coaching services to national teams.

Recommendations

The 16 recommendations contained in the study are attached. These form a strategic plan for change in the sport system in Canada. The recommendations fall into three main categories: implementing administrative measures to ensure that non-governmental sport organizations can provide an adequate level of services in both official languages; improving the bilingual capacity of Canadian coaches; and improving Sport Canada's program management.

These recommendations are addressed to Sport Canada since within the sport system, it alone is subject to the Official Languages Act.

1. By April 1, 2001, Sport Canada review the official languages goals and minimum expectations of the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework, to require sport organizations to identify and correct barriers to Francophone participation.
2. By April 1, 2001, Sport Canada systematically monitor implementation of the official language goals and minimum expectations in the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework.
3. By April 1, 2001, the Treasury Board review its official languages audit methodology in order to ensure that the programs audited not only comply with established administrative controls, but also are effective in achieving program objectives.
4. By April 1, 2001, Sport Canada review the language requirements of positions in the Athlete Assistance Program, with a view to improving the program's French-language capability, and take the necessary measures to ensure that incumbents meet the revised requirements.
5. By April 1, 2001, Sport Canada ensure that its financial contribution to major games include adequate funds to ensure that the official languages requirements can be met.
6. By April 1, 2001, Sport Canada review the language requirements of management positions, with a view to improving the French-language capability among managers, and take the necessary measures to ensure that incumbents meet the requirements of their positions.
7. By April 1, 2001, Sport Canada review the allocation of responsibilities among program officers, to ensure that client organizations can communicate with the branch in their preferred official language.
8. Sport Canada work with national sport organizations to ensure that they adopt appropriate policy statements on official languages by December 31, 2001.
9. Sport Canada require national sport organizations to review the linguistic capability of their staff by April 1, 2002, with a view to ensuring that athletes and coaches can receive appropriate services in their preferred official language at all times.
10. By April 1, 2002, Sport Canada and national sport organizations jointly review organizations' expenditures related to official languages and establish realistic budgets for this activity.

11. By April 1, 2002, Sport Canada study the feasibility of providing centralized linguistic services such as translation to sport organizations, either through government programs or through a non-governmental organization which could assume this mandate.
12. Sport Canada work with national sport organizations to identify the first official language of national team coaches by April 1, 2001, and, if necessary, take steps to ensure that coaches from both official language groups have access to positions at this level.
13. Sport Canada work with the Coaching Association of Canada and national sport organizations to ensure that technical manuals for coach education are made available in both official languages within the year following publication of this report.
14. Beginning immediately, Sport Canada work with national sport organizations to ensure that some members of the coaching group responsible for any national team have a knowledge of both official languages.
15. Beginning immediately, Sport Canada work with national sport organizations and the Coaching Association of Canada to develop pedagogical material and coaching aids to assist coaches working with linguistically mixed teams.
16. Sport Canada ensure that all national sport centres provide essential medical services in both official languages by April 1, 2001, and organize appropriate orientation services for French-speaking athletes who are moving to a predominantly English-speaking environment for the first time.

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